

Growing Into It by **Luddleston**

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Summary:

For a moment, Zagreus doubted what had happened, unable to reconcile the cool brush of Thanatos' lips with the furious look on his face.

Zagreus kind of, sort of, accidentally, definitely-not-on-purpose kisses Than. Now, he's pretty sure his closest friend hates him and he can't do anything to fix it.

Zagreus is deeply confused, Hypnos is entirely unhelpful, Thanatos is pining, Nyx is unused to dealing with adolescent gods, and Achilles would really like Zagreus to stop laying on the floor complaining about how he's ruined everything.

Growing Into It

Author's Note:

I know these two are awkward dorks even as adults, but I gotta imagine how much dorkier they were when they were kids.

Also, just gimme all that childhood friends to lovers, I live on that stuff.

"It's true! You really *are* back!"

Zagreus, as he was prone to doing, burst into Thanatos' room without first knocking, flinging himself onto the bed beside Thanatos, who'd been... sleeping? Maybe? Did he sleep? His brother certainly did, almost always, and it meant the House was dreadfully boring whenever Than wasn't around.

"Zagreus." It was all he got as a greeting, but it made Zagreus overflow with happiness anyway.

Thanatos didn't seem inclined to do much more than just continue lying there, so Zagreus flung an arm over his waist in the closest approximation of an embrace he could get. "I've missed you terribly, you know. It's been ages. A whole century, probably."

That got a laugh out of him, and Zagreus squeezed him tighter for just a second, pleased with himself, as always, for doing anything that made Thanatos so much as grin. "It wasn't anywhere near a century."

"Felt like one," Zagreus said, his voice muffled because he'd shoved his face into Than's shoulder. Thanatos was a little tense, the way he always got when he wasn't around Zagreus for a while and forgot how hands-on he was. "Where have you been, anyway? I'm assuming the mortals have gone and done... something, there's rather a lot that have just come in, and Hypnos says they've mostly died of natural causes." Whatever that meant.

Thanatos just groaned, flinging an arm over his face to hide his eyes.

"Must've been a lot of work for you, no wonder you're lying here."

He looked up just in time to see Thanatos nod. "I'd rather not discuss it," he said, unusually clipped. Zagreus felt him sigh, his chest rising under the barricade of Zag's arm. "Tell me what's been going on at the House."

Zagreus hummed, trying to come up with a story that was sufficiently entertaining to be worthy of Than's attentions. "Well. Cerberus batted Dusa all the way down the hall until she was floating above the pool of Styx the other day. Went through a whole line of shades, who were all quite offended."

Thanatos shrugged, his shoulder bumping against Zagreus' chin. "Well, it's a step up from him trying to eat her."

"You know, I'm still not sure whether he thought she was a snack or a chew toy."

Thanatos' arm slipped so that it rested above his head, revealing his profile in full to Zagreus. "I maintain that if she bit him, just the once, he'd learn to avoid trying to play with her."

Zagreus' nose wrinkled. "She's not poisonous, is she? The snakes, I mean."

"Not so far as I'm aware, no."

It'd probably work, then. Zagreus planned to say as much, but was distracted by the line of Than's jaw, which had been steadily sharpening as he progressed through adolescence. There was little trace of childishness about him anymore, and Zagreus noted that he was steadily growing to fit the shape of the longer limbs they'd both been left with after a growth spurt (Than more so than Zag, who was still nearly a head shorter).

Than's eyes were closed, white lashes brushing his cheeks, his mouth just slightly parted. Zagreus lifted his head, leaning in closer, trying to inspect

Thanatos more carefully, considering what else may have changed over the ages and ages he'd been gone.

"What are you doing." Thanatos didn't even need to open an eye to reach up and shove Zagreus a few inches away.

"I dunno, what're you doing? Going to sleep?"

"Yes," he confirmed, "you may stay, only if you're quiet. I suppose even you need some rest sometimes, Zagreus."

Doubtful. Zagreus shifted around, trying to find a comfortable spot, and then trying again—a nigh impossible task, considering that he wanted to be close to Thanatos, but Than was ridiculously bony. Maybe if Zagreus rested his head on Than's chest, but he thought perhaps that wouldn't be appreciated. It didn't help that Thanatos was wholly uncooperative.

Zagreus very narrowly avoided accidentally leaning on Than's hair, which was, as always, all over the place. At this rate, he'd have to climb *over* Thanatos to get to anywhere comfortable, which would probably get him kicked in the side if he tried.

"Zagreus. Stop moving, or get out," he said, sounding so very like Nyx, Zagreus had to laugh.

"Yes, all *right*, mother." He leaned in to give Thanatos a kiss on the cheek, as if he was bidding Nyx goodnight, but that happened to be the exact moment Thanatos turned his head.

For a moment, Zagreus doubted what had happened, unable to reconcile the cool brush of Thanatos' lips with the furious look on his face.

Achilles had told him that in battle, it was important to know when one had made a mistake, but it was more important to know how to quickly correct and recover, so one misstep didn't lead to greater injury. Zagreus had most certainly done something wrong, given the ire on Than's face, but in this arena, he had exactly zero knowledge of how to fix it. So, he fell back on the next strategy he'd learned: retreat.

"I—you know what, I should go," he said, his voice doing that uncomfortable creak it'd started making whenever he became nervous. "You'll not get any sleep with me around, anyhow."

"Zag—" Thanatos reached for him as Zagreus hopped out of the bed, "it's —"

"I'll talk to you later, okay, 'bye!"

"Zagreus!"

Without another word, Zagreus dashed out of the room so fast he swore his laurel left a couple of leaves behind, his heart pounding in his throat all the way to the other side of the House.

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"All right there, lad?" Achilles asked, mildly, as though Zagreus had not fallen right on his ass for the fourth time that session, which hadn't even lasted half an hour, by Zagreus' estimation.

"No, sir, I don't think that I am, in fact," he said, deciding he'd be better off staying down. The stone in the courtyard was unforgiving, but alas, Zagreus did not deserve forgiveness.

He opened his eyes to find Achilles crouched by his head. "What's wrong? If you are injured, or otherwise unwell, you ought to tell me."

"I'm not—I'm just. Unhappy." He rubbed at the bridge of his nose for a second, then stopped, recognizing his own actions as a habit he was picking up from his father. "Thanatos hates me."

"I was under the impression the two of you were quite close," Achilles said.

Of course he had been under such an impression. Because that had been true, until Thanatos disappeared for an eternity and Zagreus, apparently, had lost his mind in the meantime. There was little he could do to repair things, not when Thanatos was entirely unwilling to talk to him about it. Zagreus had tried, twice in as many days, and on both occasions, Thanatos had

teleported away without letting Zagreus say his piece. Quite rude of him, really. Zagreus would be angry with him, if this whole thing hadn't been his own damn fault anyway.

"I've done something stupid," he said, after a contemplative silence that seemed to worry Achilles more than anything, a little frown appearing on his handsome face. Unsurprising, considering how little Zagreus was prone to contemplative silences. "And now he refuses to talk to me."

Achilles reached out a hand, and Zagreus frowned back at him for a moment before allowing Achilles to pull him to his feet. "Much better," Achilles proclaimed him, brushing off his shoulders. "Will you tell me what you did? Perhaps I have some advice for you."

Zagreus doubted Achilles could have ever done something so foolish. He considered lying on the ground again. "I... it was nothing. It was stupid, and I wish he'd just forget about it."

"Perhaps he is not ready to talk about it as of yet," Achilles suggested. To this, Zagreus *did* fall back to the ground, albeit with his back propped against the railing so that he was not completely languishing.

"That's *fine*. We don't have to talk about that. I just want to talk to him, period." He ground the butt of his spear against the stone—just last week, he'd been thrilled to be practicing with the same weapon Achilles himself was most proficient in, and now nothing could rouse him from his sorrows.

Achilles gave a thoughtful hum, leaning against the rail aside Zagreus, in close enough range that he could scruff his fingers through Zagreus' hair. "Well, then. Invite him to join the two of us tomorrow. That way, you'll have something to do aside from talking about... whatever this is."

As always, Achilles brightened his mood considerably, as did the prospect of seeing whatever Thanatos could do with that scythe. "That's... sort of brilliant, actually. It just might work," he said, springing to his feet, and Achilles smiled beatifically, letting Zagreus loose to run about the House trying to track down Thanatos.

Finding him, Zagreus supposed, would be the hard part.

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Despite the fact that Zagreus had spent hours trying to catch him yesterday (which he'd only been able to do with some help from Nyx), the sight of Thanatos floating his usual few inches above the ground was a shock, albeit a happy one. Zagreus had nearly assumed Thanatos had accepted his offer out of politeness, only, and would come up with some excuse not to join him once the time came.

He nearly tackled Than in a hug, but restrained himself, because it was likely that wouldn't be appreciated.

Zagreus was still new to working with a spear instead of a sword, and then there was the distraction of watching Thanatos, who was quite impressive with that scythe, even though it was so large he should have hardly been able to lift it, much less swing it with any effectiveness. He'd turned Skelly to dust thrice over already, looking almost bored while he did it, and Zagreus was convinced he was just dispatching Skelly because he disliked listening to him talk. Achilles, who was also irritated by the practice skeleton, seemed to appreciate Thanatos' quick work.

He'd done so a fourth time, with one great sweep, just as Achilles told Zagreus to pause a moment so that he could adjust his grip once again. "You'll get a much larger range of motion like this," he explained, his hands over Zagreus' as he guided him.

"But *this* lets me hit things harder," Zagreus protested, mostly as a joke, changing back to his original grip, which was dreadfully incorrect, if the way Achilles' face was any indication. He looked as though he was trying very hard not to roll his eyes, patiently relocating Zagreus to the correct positioning, instead. Zagreus couldn't lie to himself, he was fooling around like this mostly to keep Achilles' hands on his longer because he enjoyed the touch, gentle, like water flowing over his knuckles, either a product of Achilles' shade form or simply the way he was.

When he looked up, Thanatos was frowning like this was the worst day he'd ever had, and like he'd rather be anywhere else. It was so unlike his look of quiet irritation whenever Zagreus had tried to approach him recently that Zag nearly dropped his spear—Thanatos looked a step beyond furious, even angrier than he'd been when Zagreus had accidentally sort-of kissed him.

He couldn't guess at the why, no time for that, he decided, stepping out of Achilles' grasp to try to inch closer to Thanatos, who was still bristling, his amber eyes looking unusually cold behind the long curtain of his hair.

"Uh, Than, are you—"

He was gone in a flash of green before Zagreus could get out the 'okay'.

Zagreus whirled around to Achilles, who was staring at the place where Thanatos was not, looking more perplexed than Zagreus had ever seen him. "Do you see!?" he asked of his mentor, who clearly did.

"I saw," Achilles confirmed.

Zagreus leaned heavily on his spear, watching the circle of light on the floor re-form as Skelly recovered from Than's latest assault. "He really does hate me."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, lad. Hate and passion are two distinct emotions, even if they may appear similar at times."

"I don't quite understand," Zagreus admitted. He certainly wouldn't make a face like *that* at something he was passionate about. Such as, for example, his martial training, which he normally faced with a smile.

"It may take some time."

Zagreus shook his head. "Yeah, alright. I'll not think too hard on it."

If he did, he well knew, Achilles would take the win immediately.

He still won, but that was probably to be expected.

— — —
"Have you seen Than around?"

Hypnos was asleep, which meant Zagreus had to repeat his question.

Twice.

"What? Huh? No, why, is he supposed to be somewhere?"

Not exactly, but Zagreus didn't have much time to delve into the issue at hand. "I haven't seen him in a while. I was wondering if he'd left the House again." It was what he was allowing himself to assume, as functioning under the idea that Thanatos was still close by but determinedly ignoring Zagreus was too painful to bear.

And yet, it seemed to be the truth. "Haven't heard that," Hypnos said. "He might've, though. I'm not in charge of keeping an eye on my brothers—even Mother Nyx can't do that much."

Zagreus knew this, because he had already asked her and she had given a cryptic answer. He sighed, yanking Hypnos' weird little mask thing down over his eyes before he left just to hear him splutter and shout at him.

Than's door was locked, and even though Zagreus *did* knock this time, he received no answer. He leaned his back against the door, briefly imagining what would happen if Thanatos were to open it from inside and send Zagreus sprawling backward.

Zagreus usually did not have such difficulty bringing himself to speak anything aloud.

"Than? Are you in there?"

No response, which was not a confirmation either way.

"Well, if you are, I just wanted to say hello." He paused, feet scuffing at the floor where there was a trickle of water left in the cracks between the stonework from the last time someone had mopped. It sizzled away almost

instantly. "And I also wanted to say that I'm sorry. I know I've made you angry, I just... I can't quite work out why. I didn't mean to... well, you know. I would never attempt to do something that could damage our friendship, after all. But I do a lot of things unintentionally, anyhow."

He leaned his head back against the door, the tap of it too gentle to sound like a knock.

"Achilles keeps telling me it might take time. But I'm just awful at waiting, you know that. So, I supposed I'd tell you now: if you want to talk about... whatever, I'm... I'll... you know where to find me."

It sounded incredibly stupid, even as it fell from his lips, and Zagreus shook his head, wishing he could suck the words back in and pretend he'd never said something so silly.

He pictured Thanatos opening the door just after Zagreus rushed away, barely missing him in the spare moments it took to cross the room and turn the handle. Thanatos would linger there, poised on the edge of speaking, and then—

Zagreus turned, and nobody was there, the door shut as firmly as ever.

— — —

"Mother, please." Thanatos curled into himself, arms folded across his chest, wishing he could simply make himself small enough to avoid detection from Nyx entirely.

His mother, of course, could phase distances as great as Thanatos himself, and so unlike Zagreus, she was not hampered by a locked door.

"He's been rushing about the House all day, asking after you." Nyx folded her hands primly in her lap, leaving a good amount of distance between herself and her son, which Thanatos knew was for his benefit. He'd never liked feeling boxed in. "At least tell him you aren't angry with him. There's nothing wrong with needing some time for yourself, but you must explain this to him."

"I... can't." Thanatos let his head drop forward onto his knees, as close to being curled into a ball as he could get, being shaped like a god and not like Dusa. He could feel the familiar flutter of useless emotion in his stomach, trying hard to push it away. "Mother, you don't understand."

"I admit, I do not. Perhaps I could, if you spoke to me of what bothered you?"

Of course she didn't. Thanatos doubted Charon had any adolescent longing for romances that could never be.

Thanatos supposed he did sound a bit like his elder brother, though, when he groaned, the actual words still stuck in his throat.

I love him, he thought, but were it so simple, he wouldn't be hiding in his room, trying to avoid Zagreus at every turn.

"He kissed me," he said instead, "but he didn't do it on purpose, and he ran away immediately after—and I *know* his attentions are elsewhere." Watching Zagreus with his beloved mentor was just painful, the way he blushed and preened when given the slightest encouragement. It would disgust him, if he wasn't so taken by how adorable Zagreus was.

"I doubt Zagreus will restrain his affections to one person only," Nyx said, "few of us do, after all."

"I might," he muttered, cringing at how utterly childish that sounded, wanting Zagreus all to himself, and no other.

Nyx ran a hand through his hair, the gentle pressure of her fingernails against his scalp steadily calming the miasma of emotion that had risen to his chest. "You are young, and these things take time," she said, and Thanatos was reminded that Nyx was as old as darkness itself. The wisdom of the ages, however, had nothing on *how much he wanted to kiss Zagreus again*.

Blood and darkness, was this hopeless.

Practically speaking, though, he knew he could not remain hidden like this forever, although a part of him wanted to do so at least until he returned to his duties. "What do I even... it's as if I've forgotten how to speak to him entirely."

"This, at least, is one advantage when it comes to Prince Zagreus. It is quite easy to allow him to do the talking."

And, well. So it was.

Author's Note:

find me doing additional hades nonsense (and then nanowrimo nonsense in a couple days) on twitter/tumblr @luddlestons